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# A NOTE ON ROSSETTI

BY ARTHUR SYMONS

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## I

SINCE Leonardo da Vinci and Blake, was there any painter except Rossetti who was so immensely gifted, and in such various ways?

I think that, in a certain sense, his imagination often worked under a single and a double inspiration. His genius was composed of so many contrasting elements that it may be said that a song and a picture were conceived by some sudden instinct; that, with his unflagging energy, he rarely knew in what direction his very impulses were leading him, where his sense of abstract beauty was driving him, as he passed from *La Bocca Boccia* to *Dante's Dream*. He had in him a sense of rhythm so supreme that the cadences of a line of his verse has the same sweep of the hand as in a painted fan. With no passion for music as music, he gives one as actual a sense of it in a stanza of *The Bride's Prelude* as in the fixed eyes of one of his portraits of women.

I am not certain if Pater said quite the final thing when he wrote: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." It was Leonardo da Vinci who said, in a more deeply imaginative way: "Music cannot be called other than the sister of painting." It may be imagined that music and harmony are co-existent: that they are "dancers in the eternal rhythm." Yet I cannot conceive, save rarely (as, for instance, in Giorgione), that any painter ever seriously thought of any connection between these two arts. Yet the legend is that, to the sound of flutes and the presence of mimes, Leonardo wove, year after year, the web of his magical *Gioconda*.

It was one of Rossetti's glories to paint luxuriously luxurious women, surrounded by every form of luxury. And some of them are set to pose in Eastern garments, with caskets in their hands and flames about them, looking out with unsearchable eyes. His colors, before they began to have, like his forms, an exaggeration, a blurred vision which gave him the need of repainting, of depriving his figures of life, were as if charmed into their own places; they took on at times some strange and stealthy and startling ardors of paint, with a subtle fury. By his fiery imagination, his restless energy, he created a world: curious, astonishing, at first sight; strange, morbid, and subtly beautiful. Everything he made was chiefly for his own pleasure; he had a contempt for the outside world, and his life was so given up to beauty, in the search for it and in the finding of it, that one can but say not only that his life was passion consumed by passion, as his nerves became more and more his tyrants (tyrants, indeed, these were, more formidable and more alluring and more tempting than even the nerves confess), but also that, in the words of Pater: "To him life is a crisis at every moment."

There was in him, as in many artists, the lust of the eyes. And as others feasted their lust on elemental things, as in Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed*, as in Whistler's *Valparaiso*, as in the *Olympia* of Manet, as in a *Décor de Ballet* of Degas, so did Rossetti upon other regions than theirs. He had neither the evasive and instinctive genius of Whistler, nor Turner's tremendous sweep of vision, nor the creative and fiercely imaginative genius of Manet. But he had his own way of feasting on forms and visions more sensuous, more nervously passionate, more occult, perhaps, than theirs. Yet, as his intentions overpowered him, as he becomes the slave and no longer the master of his dreams, his pictures become no longer symbolic. They become idols. Venus, growing more and more Asiatic as the moon's crescent begins to glitter above her head, and her name changes from Aphrodite into Astarte, loses all the freshness of the waves from which she was born, and her own sorcery hardens into a wooden image painted for savage worship. Dreams are no longer content to be turned into waking realities, taking the color of the daylight, that they may be visible to our eyes, but they remain lunar, spectral, an unintelligible menace.

## II

In the fire and imagination of Rossetti's genius there is intensity—of will, of conception, of spiritual intoxication, “of large draughts of intellectual day,” and of “thirsts of love.” There is a glamor and an enchantment that bring into modern verse a certain all but unheard-of sense of strangeness; as, for instance, where his verse is most tragic and narcotic, hallucinated and sinuously subtle. In his gnomic *Soothsay* he shows that no enchanter can ever be quite certain of his spells:

Strive that thy works prove equal: lest  
That work which thou hast done the best  
Should come to be to thee at length  
(Even as to envy seems the strength  
Of others) hateful and abhorred,—  
Thine own above thyself made lord,—  
Of self-rebuke the bitterest.

It is equally certain that he rarely dared to let himself “do naught” for fear “of the soul's utter depths unsealed.” And he said, with real subtlety, on his revision of one of his sonnets: “Solemn poetry belongs to the class of phrase absolutely forbidden, I think, *in* poetry. It is intellectually incestuous—poetry seeking to beget its emotional offspring on its own identity.”

That Rossetti, whose face indicated voluptuousness brooding thoughtfully over destiny, was intensely sensitive, is true; and this made him a sort of medium to forces seen and unseen. So he fascinated women; so did the supernatural fascinate him. Next after Coleridge, his vision, lifted into its highest ecstasies, possessed and was possessed by the supernatural. It may begin in *Sister Helen* and end in *The King's Tragedy*. Between these comes *Rose Mary* (written in 1871), in which an occult imagination has created (in a medium unlike that of Coleridge), as an exorcist, a region where the supernatural element is constantly fused with inevitable realities; where one sees in the soul that was lost to bring it back

A cloud where fiends had come to dwell,—  
A mask that hung from the gate of Hell.

And in the tragic woof of this conception there is that kind of wizardry in which, as it seems to me, Rossetti reclothes

himself in the enchanter's robes of Coleridge. For, even in these two stanzas, one finds how the spirit of the first poet is translated into the spirit of the later poet:

A snake's small eye blinks dull and sly,  
And the lady's eyes they shrank in her head,  
Each shrank up to a serpent's eye.

It seemed a snake with a golden sheath  
Crept near, as a slow flame flickereth,  
And stung her daughter's heart to death.

*Sister Helen* (in a sense, his highest creation) is an arduous sensuous tragedy, where the soul and the senses of this creature endure "the terrible Love turned to Hate, perhaps the deadliest of all passion-woven complexities," visualized, by pure magic, on a small space of the earth, that lies between Hell and Heaven. And all this is only a part of that sense of suspense that comes over one's senses, as omen follows on omen, as Helen's pulses beat more wildly until they and she expire. And she, turned witch for a reason, transformed into a breathing and destroying angel, of no perdition, is driven by an absolute sense of vengeance to destroy her lover's life. She is simply possessed by the one fixed idea: she is one who has loved and hated too much to care even for her life's survival: she who can cry:

He sees me in earth, in moon and sky.

She is one who knows that "Hate, born of Love, is blind as he," that she has not one drop of living love for the man whose soul is to pass before her eyes. Yet her one heart-rending cry before she sighs out the last, is:

Fire shall forgive me as I forgive!

With this her strength leaves her; all that remains is death:

A soul that's lost as mine is lost!

*A Last Confession*, the only poem that Rossetti wrote in blank verse, is more than a soul's tragedy: it is the tragedy of ruined hopes; of love's deceptions; a confession in which the imagination is not everything, so colored is it, so filled with fire and shadow. It is in one nervous crisis that he utters implacable words against woman: out of his heart's despair, out of the heart's despair of all of us who have known "the hatred of man for woman, the hatred of woman for man":

You have not known  
 The dreadful soul of woman, who one day  
 Forgets the old and takes the new to heart,  
 Forgets what man remembers, and therewith  
 Forgets the man.

Yet he has heard souls shriek in Latin; has heard the bell "strike the hour in hell"; has always before him the vision of the girl he has slain, who menaces him, always in his sight, in his hearing, in the laugh of the brown-shouldered harlot,—her coarse empty laughter, as he saw her lean out of the tavern window thick with vine. So, with one touch of vain hope—"we may have sweetness yet"—he turns back on himself, on his moment's madness, when fire was blood, and says, as one eternally hopeless, seeing her unwind her thick wet hair:

For now she draws it out  
 Slowly, and only smiles as yet; look, Father,  
 She scarcely smiles; but I shall hear her laugh  
 Soon, when she shows the crimson steel to God.

As for the flesh, when he touches it in his verses, it is intimate with the soul and the body, as clean and natural as sex; as he himself said: "with that beauty of natural universal function" which one finds in *Nuptial Sleep*; and "here all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared—somewhat figuratively, but unmistakably—to be as naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times." In *Eden Bower* there is also a "central universal meaning": a song that whirls on the wings of scented whirlwinds, as abnormal passions turn, in Lillith and the Snake, malignant. Again, take *Jenny*, so Pagan in spirit, so modern in treatment, where a mere sensual courtesan's form of life is explained to her (with what wonderful insight!) by the "Romeo of a night," with, certainly, a half cynical revulsion of feeling; and as certainly woven out of an eternal problem. And it is in such lines as these that he troubles many rhythms that had become stagnant:

Some things which are not yet enrolled  
 In market-lists are bought and sold  
 Even till the early Sunday light  
 When Saturday night is market-night  
 Everywhere, be it dry or wet,  
 And market-night in the Haymarket.

Certainly it is in *Nuptial Sleep* that Rossetti has said, in his own fashion, what Blake had said before him in these lines:

What is it men in women do require?  
The lineaments of gratified desire.  
What is it women do in men require?  
The lineaments of gratified desire.

But the less famous sonnet, *After the French Liberation of Italy*, is one in which the image of a woman is used literally—used for Italian reasons—in the form of a harlot; the most explicit sonnet ever written in regard to the question of the sexual relationship.

No modern poet ever had anything like the same grasp upon whatever is essential in poetry that Rossetti had; for all that he wrote or said about Art has in it an absolute rightness of judgment; and with these, as absolutely, an intellectual sanity. Here is one principle of artistic creation stated with instantaneous certainty: “Conception, *fundamental brain work*, that is what makes the difference in all art. Work your metal as much as you like, but first take care that the gold was worth working.” But it is, strangely enough, that at the beginning of a review of Hake’s *Parables and Tales* he says the final, the inevitable words on creation, and on what lies in the artist’s mind before the act of creation: “The first and highest is that where the work has been all mentally ‘cartooned,’ as it were, beforehand by a process intensely conscious, but patient and silent—an occult evolution of life: then follows the glory of wielding words, and we see the hand of Dante, as the hand of Michelangelo—or almost as that quickening hand which Michelangelo has dared to embody—sweep from left to right, fiery and final.”

That the spirit is greater than the flesh, that the spirit can never be reached by killing the flesh, is no new discovery; it is the wise interpretation by a modern critic of the original meaning. And it certainly typifies the creative work of Blake and of Rossetti; and of these alone. Yet while Rossetti’s grip on the flesh is sensuous and luxurious, Blake’s is imaginative and unsensuous. Yet in both how eagerly the soul struggles to escape the thralldom of the body!—Blake in his writhing convulsed figures in Dantesque agonies; Rossetti in his women’s haunting, half-mystical eyes, thrilled (as the full red lips are) by the main desire of

the one desire: to be loved, as only absolute beauty is loved.

To him *The House of Life* (really, in his imagination, The House of Love: as there is no mystic to whom love has not seemed to be the essence or ultimate expression of the soul) was symbolic, as are our bodies. Instinctively drawn to faces (chiefly women's faces), he narrowed his ideals, such as they were, into this one form of intensity: his obsession for beauty, which included his obsession for women. And as he said of beauty, "I draw it in as simply as my breath," so did his thirst for these two increase with the increase of years.

Again, his seclusion was simply for lack of enough sympathy: he wanted in life more, I think, than did most men of such genius as he had. For what sense of peace can one restless soul give to another?

Yes, as Watts-Dunton said in his fundamental criticism of Rossetti: "He was the slave of his imagination—an imagination of a power and dominance such as I have never seen equaled. Of his vividness, no artistic expression of his can give any notion. He had not the smallest command over it."

The tremulous flame of his soul was disturbed by a mere breath, a sound, a shock on his nerves; more than anything else by suspense—on his own account and on others'; and simply for the reason that his sensitiveness was so intense that it interpenetrated his work with his life. And he was one of those rare artists to whom these verses might be applied:

Henceforth for each of us remains the world.  
The gates have closed behind us, we are hurled  
From the fixed paradise of our content  
Into an outer world of banishment,  
And, in this anger of the garden's Lord,  
His serene angel with the fiery sword  
Has yet more pitilessly cast us forth,  
You by the gate that looks upon the North,  
And I by the gate looking on the South.

ARTHUR SYMONS.